

Conservation Showcase

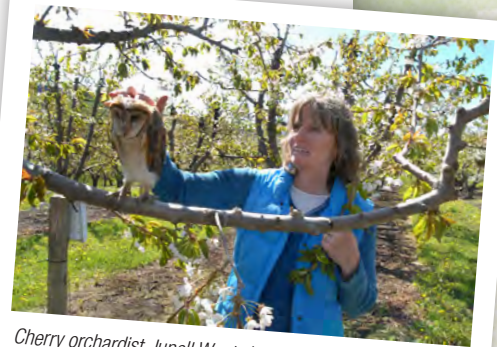
Orchard Takes 'Natural' Path to Pest Control

The harvest season of 2009 was not a good one for Junell and Jerry Wentz. There wasn't a market for their high quality cherries that year, and they would have lost money by picking the fruit, so they left it to rot on the trees and fall to the ground.

Unfortunately, all of that fruit sowed the seeds for an unwelcomed bumper crop of mice, pocket gophers and voles the next spring. And because the small, furry rodents could quickly inflict serious damage to their Wenatchee, Wash., cherry orchard, they needed a solution — and fast.

Pesky rodents can be incredibly destructive, burrowing underground and feeding on trees' root system. And since they're hidden from the naked eye, the only way to spot them is by knowing the signs: small mounds of dirt surrounding trees. Once rodents infest an orchard, fruit trees can be damaged beyond repair, giving orchard owners no choice but to remove their plantings.

Most growers use pesticide pellets to control rodent populations. But Junell Wentz, who has slowly taken over management of her and her husband's farm in the last 15 years, wanted a smarter, cheaper and more natural solution.



Cherry orchardist Junell Wentz has made friends with this owl, which helps control rodents that infest her tree rows.

"To me it was like, 'It's a great idea. I get help for funding and get to make a better environment for my orchard with less time and less money.' There are no losses as far as I can see. Any farmer that doesn't take advantage of this is missing out," says Wentz of EQIP.

Wentz had heard about the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through a Farm Service Agency newsletter. By working with NRCS, Wentz was able to get the funding, technical assistance and information to begin controlling the rodent population on her farm in a more natural way.

To control the rodent population on her farm, Wentz uses a combination of oatmeal mixed with plaster of Paris, housed within PVC bait stations placed strategically throughout her farm. This mixture helps eliminate the rodents but does not harm any other wildlife, including predatory birds and household pets.

Now Wentz is taking pest management to the next level by building a barn owl box, kestrel box and a perch pole — all with the help of NRCS.

Inviting predatory birds such as barn owls, red tail hawks and kestrels onto her farm allows nature to take its course through Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Wentz also works with the nonprofit Northwest Spirit Wildlife, which released six young barn owls on her farm in the spring.

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Conservation Showcase (continued)

By providing them with an initial diet of lab mice and giving them a place to live, the owls have already made the Wentz farm their home, helping control the rodent population and saving countless dollars. “It’s smarter. We’re saving money,” Wentz says. “Having struggled financially in the past with our orchard, every dime counts. It keeps us here and allows us to do this.”

NRCS resource conservationist in Chelan County, Amy Hendershot, is working with the Wentz orchard in on implementing EQIP to control rodents. Hendershot says she is “very impressed” by owner Junell Wentz’s drive and willingness to try new things. “The amazing thing about Junell is that all I have to do is mention an idea, and the next time I see her she has researched it all. I feel very fortunate to work with a farmer like her,” says Hendershot.

In working with NRCS, Wentz has continued to learn as much as she can to conserve the resources on her farm. In addition to controlling the rodent population, she has also installed various structures to conserve water, control insect pests and promote pollination of her trees all within the last year.

With funding provided by NRCS, Wentz recently installed soil moisture monitors throughout her farm, with sensors set at depths of 6, 18 and 30 inches. These sensors allow her to accurately monitor the soil’s moisture content and make informed decisions precisely on when to irrigate and for how long.

On a steep slope near the back of her orchard, Wentz installed a hedgerow of native plants with the guidance of NRCS and the Cascadia Conservation District. This

hedgerow will not only provide a habitat for her feathery friends and predatory insects, but also will add natural beauty to her land.

Additionally, she’s attached what looks like a makeshift honeycomb to her barn owl box pole — a large PVC pipe with multiple smaller tubes inside — in the hopes that mason bees will make this their home. Mason bees are heartier than honeybees, and since they don’t store food like honeybees, they have to continually search for it even in inclement weather, making them an “all-weather pollinator.” The mason bee also prefers fruit blossoms to dandelions, so they are the perfect bees to pollinate Wentz’s trees.

“The blooms won’t wait for bees to come and pollinate them,” Wentz says, “and if they aren’t pollinated, then we’ll have fewer and fewer cherries.”

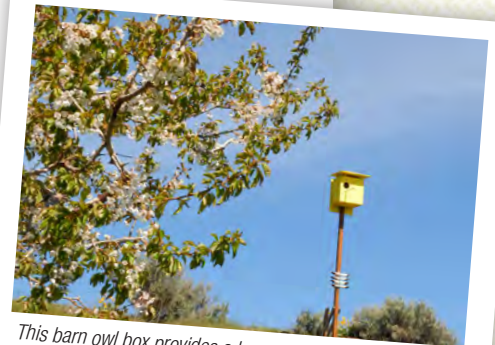
“The future for Wentz can only continue to get brighter,” says Hendershot. Wentz is working toward making her fruit as naturally grown as possible, without running the risk of losing it. She has also become an advocate for IPM, writing letters to her neighbors, asking them to spray less and giving them advice on how to implement some of the same systems she uses on her farm.

Wentz hopes that other farmers will take the time to research IPM and then give it a try. She has recently joined the Cascadia Conservation District board as an associate supervisor to provide leadership and technical assistance to local farmers who are interested in similar activities.

“Sometimes you just have to go out on a limb. There is nothing bad that’s going on here; this is all good,” Wentz says. “If you took down a list of good and bad parts, I cannot think of one bad thing. I would welcome anyone to come out to my farm and see what I am doing,” she says.



Bee Tubes: tubes within tubes like these are a natural way to attract mason bees that work fruit orchards during pollination periods.



This barn owl box provides a home for the natural predators, keeping them on the farm and working to exterminate rodents the way nature intended.